THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

January 6, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 60:1-7
Matthew 2:1-12

"And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." -Matthew 2:12 (NRSV)

"On the Twelfth Day of Christmas
My True Love Gave To Me Twelve
Drummers Drumming..."

The song celebrates the Twelve Days of Christmas, the season of Christmas, or Christmastide, beginning with December 25 and extending to January 6, Epiphany, which in the tradition of the church, marks the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem. Most of us didn't know anything about the Twelve Days of Christmas until the song became popular. The Christmas Season in my mind began the Saturday after Thanksgiving, when the Christmas parades were on television and the glittery decorations, candles and stars began to appear in the stores. "Imagine that," parents used to cluck, "pushing the Christmas Season all the way up to Thanksgiving." In any event, all the action was pre-Christmas: parties, caroling, shopping, and the delicious anticipation of the surprises Christmas morning might bring; and then an enormous reduction of the excitement during the day on December 25 and an actual let-down on the 26th. With a little help the season could be stretched to January 1, but surely that was the end and the tree came down and decorations were stored.

Until the song told us, most of us didn't know there were twelve days of Christmas, and I don't know about your true love, but mine didn't give me twelve drummers drumming or anything else, for that matter, this morning because Christmas is, as they say, "history."

I suppose that is the ultimate preempt. The culture has managed to convince us of the irrelevance of one of our oldest traditions; has thoroughly convinced us that the preparation is actually the event, that "the getting ready" is the point, and that once the day arrives we need to be off on other matters. But the oldest Christian Christmas tradition is

Christmastide, a festival for twelve days, bracketed in time by the tradition of the birth on December 25 and the arrival of the wise men twelve days later.

In my childhood imagination the wise men arrived on Christmas Eve, shortly after the shepherds left. The shepherds couldn't stay long, I used to reason. They had to get back to the sheep. And the wise men, being a little mysterious, more sophisticated and elegant, arrived fashionably late - around midnight.

The older tradition is that they arrived on the Twelfth Night, Epiphany, January 6. This is their day. And as they always have, they still live only partially in history, and for the better part in legend, imagination, art and poetry.

The story of how legends grew up around the Magi is fascinating in itself. The early Christian Church was more taken by their story than Luke's story of the shepherds. After all, shepherds were common, pedestrian, not at all an attractive profession. Shepherds were rough, crude, ignorant. Strangers from the East, astronomers, bearing exotic gifts were intriguing. [The Birth of the Messiah, Raymond E. Brown, p. 165-201]

The traditions grew independent of historic or Scriptural evidence. First, the Magi were said to be royalty, kings, although there is no mention of that in Scripture. Next they became three, although all the Bible indicates is that there was more than one. By the sixth century they had names, physical descriptions and racial characteristics.

Relics said to be their bones were brought from Persia to Constantinople in 490, made their way to Milan and when Emperor Frederick Barbarossa ravished Italy in 1161 he brought them to Cologne where they may be seen today. There, in Cologne, you can read, with their relics, the ancient "obituary of the Saints," that they met again in 54 A.D. in Armenia to celebrate Christmas; and then all died - Melchior on January 1, Balthazar on January 6, and Gaspar on January 11.

At the time of the Reformation the Protestants were opposed to the practice and the idea of the adoration of relics. And so the shepherds, modest, not royal, and without relics to adore, became Protestantism's favorite Christmas characters.

But theologically and practically, they are as important and perhaps more so. They represent the universalism of Christianity... it's capacity, unlike other religions, to transcend culture and race and ethnicity and therefore to be an agent of humanity's unity - not division - a critical issue and not one with which we have always been successful. But there it is at the beginning. These are not Jewish prophets; they are Arabs. And then the journey, the decision to go, to follow the star, and subsequently, the necessity to take another way home. Those are big, important, pregnant issues. T. S. Eliot captivated it in a wonderful poem, "Journey of the Magi":

"'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter'...
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor
and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack
of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns
unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly."

It was a hard journey... and the hardest part of all was their own doubt, their sense that it may be folly. Years later one of them looks back and says:

"All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth,
certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt, I had seen
birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this
Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our
death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old
dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death."

[T. S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," The Wasteland And Other Poems, Harvest Books, p. 69-70]

Who were they? The word is Magi, plural: the text doesn't say how many there were or where they came from, just that they came from the East which could mean Persia (Iran), Arabia (Saudi Arabia), Babylon (Iraq), and that they brought gifts. The term Magi - plural for Magus, which we translate "wise men," is very old and originally referred to a tribe of priests in the Perisan Empire. They were regarded as seers, magicians, sometimes healers.

They knew a lot about astronomy and they incorporated what they knew into a religion, not unlike the astrology which continues to function as a kind of religion for millions of modern American - even some in very high places. New truth and significant events in human history, the Magi believed, were signaled by the stars. And much of the ancient world believed that the birth of a great person would be announced by the appearance of a new star.

The Adler Planetarium Christmas show, "The Star of Bethlehem," explains the best current theories about the star. In fact our planetarium is cited in the definitive scholarly treatment of Matthew 2, in Raymond E. Brown's The Birth of the Messiah. The planets Jupiter and Saturn converged three times around the time Jesus was born.

So the tradition goes, Magi, probably Babylonian, watching the stars every night, see this unusual brightness and conclude that something important is happening somewhere west of where they are, perhaps the birth of a new king.

So they set out, traveling at night in order to observe the star. When they arrive in Jerusalem, ancient capital of the Jews, now occupied by the Romans, they naturally called at the Royal Palace where, they assume, a birth must have taken place. However, presiding in the palace is Herod the Great, Rome's puppet king, one of the more unsavory characters in history. The Magi don't know about it, but in order to consolidate his position with his Roman overlords, Herod has murdered members of his own family. When Caesar Augustus, the Emperor, hears about it, he says, "I would rather be Herod's pig than his son."

The Magi are political innocents: they are as naive as absent-minded professors says Raymond Brown. They ask Herod where the new king was born - Herod who murders his own babies so they will not threaten his position.

Herod is not naive. He convenes the Jewish religious authorities and scholars and says, "Just for the record, if this Messiah you're waiting for actually came, where would he be born?" I can almost see them, so pleased to be asked a question by the king, so very pleased for once to have useful information. And so they can't wait to tell him.

> "And you, O Bethlehem, from you shall
> come a ruler." Micah said so.

Think of the subtlety of that. Herod, the child-murdering tyrant, gets from the religious scholars the information the gentile astrologers need to find the Messiah. There's a lot going on here!

Herod must have told the wise men that it will be Bethlehem and asks them, all sweetness and innocence, to find the child and then come tell him so that he, too, may acknowledge and worship this new king. And off they go: five more miles to Bethlehem. It was probably the only inn in the little town. They probably stayed there. And maybe when they took their camels or donkeys or horses out back to the barn, they saw the family, still there... And maybe it dawned on them, like the mysterious light of the star, that this is what they were looking for.

So maybe they opened their camel-packs on the spot and to the absolute amazement of the mother and father who, by now had seen a lot of people come and go, stabling their animals every evening, they took out gifts; as strange and magnificent and mysterious as they were: frankencense, a fragrant gum-resin, burned in Hebrew worship; myrrh, fragrant oil, a perfume, sensual, beautiful, also used for burial annointing; and gold, the symbol of royalty.

They don't go back to Herod's palace, of course, not that they have figured it out yet. They have an intuition, a dream; one of them wakes at three a.m. with a lump in his throat and the shortness of breath that comes from free-floating anxiety, and they take it to be a warning and they "leave for their own country by another road."

It is one of our best stories and it contains God's word to us. It is behind a lovely tradition, namely, that after the festivities there is a time of reflection, a time to ask about the deeper significance of the event we celebrated.

It is not inappropriate to extend the metaphor. We have been following a star. For about six weeks actually: we have been following the star of Bethlehem. It has been an arduous journey. But we've rather enjoyed it. There have been moments of beauty and love; there has been excitement and singing and color. The "getting there" has been fun. On the night of our arrival there was magic in the air, candlelight and the singing of angels, and wonderful gifts.

Learn from these wise men - their story and their very wise traditions.

Learn, for instance, that outsiders discover the Christ, while the religious establishment falls all over itself to please the king. Learn from the wise men, the ones who are the wrong race, the wrong color, the wrong religion, and the ones who fall down on their knees before the child, while the chosen ones, the mainliners, are busy keeping the public order.

Learn from the wise men that the insiders are busy supporting the status quo, politically and economically, in the very halls of power and authority; while the outsiders are giving lavish and generous gifts to a baby.

Learn the lesson of the wise men, that if you see the child, you cannot go back the way you came.

> "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
> But no longer at ease here, in the old
> dispensation,
> With an alien people clutching their gods,
> I should be glad of another death."

If it is Jesus the Christ you have seen, you are no longer at ease in the old status quo. This birth causes the death of old ways, patterns, behaviors, and places on a new road those who have actually witnessed it.

Learn from the wise men that the first thing that happens to a person who has encountered Jesus Christ, the Word made Flesh, is a challenge to comfortable tradition. From the outset the story is clear. There is a "Cost of Discipleship." There is a moment to decide to follow the star. It is no easy thing to be his man or woman. Following the star to the place of his birth, following the man to the place of his death, following him now, here, in our lives, will require bravery, internal strength, and, most of all, willingness to think and act anew.

For instance, one of the universal characteristics of religion is exclusivism. Religion functions universally to support and encourage the national, ethnic, racial tribalism that is the chief reason why human beings cannot seem to live together without conflict. Religion supports the tribalism that is, this moment, causing the death of rival groups on every continent.

Because it is deeply felt, religion seems sometimes to be the enemy of openess and tolerance, which are the components of peace. In order to keep the faith pure, followers of Jesus, in good conscience, have concluded that those who do not see things from our perspective should be excluded - they do not deserve equal rights. Starting with the Crusades, which were often simply a Christian version of the Jihad we so profoundly deplore in Islam, Christians have concluded that it is appropriate to wage war, imprison, and execute people who will not acknowledge our truth.

And sometimes, because our religious traditions have so willingly and enthusiastically played a supporting role to our tribal, nationalistic inclinations, we have engaged in racial stereotyping, attributing to others the worst characteristics we could think of - as in "all Arabs are sneaky, dishonest and violent."

People who have been to Bethlehem cannot go home that way. People who have been to Bethlehem cannot help but notice that the first to greet him are not the insiders, the elect, the chosen people, but strange looking outsiders; not Jews, but Arabs.

The road to Bethlehem requires commitment. The road from Bethlehem, from the pleasant festivities of Christmas, is different and arduous and demanding. It will require openness and generosity and creativity and personal sacrifice.

The key is the decision to travel it; to summon the personal strength and courage we need to become new people altogether because of what we have seen.

That's the issue finally and the Magi were the first to know it.

There is a decision to be made by every pilgrim.

You cannot see the child and go back by the same road.

There is before each of us a decision, much like a fork in the road. Having been where we have been, having seen what we have seen, we must now decide who we will be.

It is the idea contained in a wonderful Robert Frost poem, "The Road Not Taken":

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

[Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," A Pocket Book of Modern Verse, Washington Square Press, p. 236]

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God of all gentleness and all kindness, we are grateful for the lovely traditions of Christmas. May we not neglect to see the choices now ahead of us. May we take up the journey, the following, on the new road of faithfulness and justice and love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.